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**Investigation into Puente 13 Street Gang Leads to Federal
Charges Against 17 Defendants on Narcotics, Fraud and
Identity Theft Charges**

LOS ANGELES – Federal authorities have arrested 12 defendants on federal narcotics and fraud charges stemming from an investigation into the Puente 13 street gang. Those arrested last night and this morning are among 17 defendants named in a series of indictments returned by a federal grand jury that allege various offenses, including narcotics, bank fraud and aggravated identity theft. The other five charged defendants were already in federal and state custody.

The investigation into the Mexican Mafia-affiliated Puente 13 street gang was led by the United States Secret Service and the Drug Enforcement Administration, and included a series of wiretaps that revealed criminal activity by gang members, gang associates and others.

The 17 defendants are charged in 12 indictments and one criminal complaint that allege a wide range of crimes, including possession with the intent to distribute methamphetamine and heroin, conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine, possession of a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, felon in possession of a firearm, bank fraud, conspiracy to commit bank fraud, aggravated identity theft, illegal possession of access devices (credit cards), possession of access device making equipment, and possession of stolen mail.

The investigation began when authorities learned that Puente 13 member Victor Ponce De Leon was allegedly involved in drug trafficking, with intercepted communications indicating he was willing to sell methamphetamine. One of the indictments that names Ponce De Leon specifically alleges a drug transaction in which he sold a quarter ounce of methamphetamine while armed with a 9mm handgun.

As the investigation expanded, authorities also uncovered an identity theft ring. While most of the participants are charged in separate cases, stolen credit cards and personal identifying information from numerous common victims were found in the possession of multiple defendants.

During the five-month investigation, law enforcement also uncovered a scheme to smuggle narcotics into the Pitchess Detention Center in Castaic. That conduct is captured in an indictment alleging that Ricky Lee Thornburg, another Puente 13 member who was an inmate at the Pitchess Detention Center, planned to receive smuggled methamphetamine from fellow co-conspirators and distribute the drugs to other inmates. This indictment, which charges the alleged supplier of the drugs and a woman who allegedly attempted to smuggle the methamphetamine into the

facility, alleges that more than two ounces of methamphetamine and some heroin, all of which was concealed in plastic drinking straws, was intercepted as the woman was preparing to visit De Leon at Pitchess in May.

The 17 defendants charged as a result of this investigation are:

- Victor Ponce De Leon, a convicted felon also known as “Dopey,” 26, of La Puente, who is charged in two indictments with conspiring to possess with intent to distribute methamphetamine, distributing methamphetamine, possessing a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking, being a felon in possession of a firearm, bank fraud, conspiring to commit bank fraud, aggravated identity theft, and possessing stolen mail;
- James W. Butcher, 54, of Covina, who allegedly agreed to purchase methamphetamine from Ponce De Leon for redistribution;
- Ricky Lee Thornburg, also known as “Shorty,” 39, of Glendora, who is charged in two indictments with orchestrating the plot to smuggle narcotics into Pitchess, as well as possessing methamphetamine with the intent to distribute it and carrying a firearm in furtherance of drug trafficking;
- Beatris Gomez, 39, of Glendora, who allegedly supplied the narcotics to be smuggled into the jail and drove to the facility, is also charged with possessing an access device reader/encoder;
- Patricia Marie Jimenez, 32, of La Puente, who is charged in two indictments with attempting to smuggle the narcotics into the Pitchess by hiding the drug-laden straws in her boots, as well as possessing counterfeit currency, possessing unauthorized access devices, aggravated identity theft and possession of stolen mail;
- Melody Basye, 38, of San Bernardino, who allegedly possessed methamphetamine with intent to distribute it, possessed counterfeit access devices and possessed an access-device maker;
- Joseph Anthony Castro, 37, of Azusa, who allegedly possessed with intent to distribute heroin, possessed counterfeit access devices (including social security numbers), committed aggravated identity theft, and possessed approximately \$4,650 in counterfeit currency;
- Matthew Burciaga, also known as “Porky,” 32, of La Puente, who allegedly possessed an access device reader/encoder;
- Yvonne Marie Estrada, 35, of Covina, who allegedly possessed with intent to distribute methamphetamine;
- Maribel Gomez, 25, of Azusa, who allegedly committed bank fraud, aggravated identity theft, and possessed with intent to distribute methamphetamine;
- Elizabeth Joyce McDowell, also known as “Lilly,” 23, of West Covina, who allegedly conspired to commit bank fraud, and committed aggravated identity theft;
- Priscilla Telles, also known as “Babydoll,” 31, of La Puente, who allegedly conspired to commit bank fraud and committed aggravated identity theft;
- David Ortega, also known as “No-No,” 23, of Hacienda Heights, who allegedly possessed unauthorized access devices, committed aggravated identity theft, and possessed stolen mail;
- Ulices Ramon Soto, also known as “Uli,” 36, of Whittier, who allegedly was a felon in possession of a firearm and ammunition, possessed unauthorized access devices,

committed aggravated identity theft, possessed device-making equipment, and possessed stolen mail;

- Thomas Arroyave, 34, of Azusa, who allegedly possessed unauthorized access devices, committed aggravated identity theft, possessed with intent to use or transfer at least five identification documents, possessed access device-making equipment, possessed stolen mail, and was a convicted felon in possession of a firearm and ammunition;
- Edward Padilla, also known as “Spunks,” 24, of Chino Hills, who allegedly was a felon in possession of firearms and ammunition; and
- Ruby Escarcega, 22, of Chino Hills, who allegedly aided and abetted a felon in possession of firearms and ammunition;

The 12 defendants arrested last night and today are expected to be arraigned this afternoon in United States District Court in downtown Los Angeles. The other five – Thornburg, Basye, Arroyave, Maribel Gomez and Jimenez – are expected to be brought into federal court for arraignments in these cases in the near future.

Indictments and criminal complaints contain allegations that a defendant has committed a crime. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.

If convicted, those facing narcotics offenses general face mandatory minimum sentences of five years in federal prison and maximum possible sentences of 40 years. Those charged with fraud offenses face a range of penalties, with bank fraud carrying a statutory maximum sentence of 30 years in prison and aggravated identity theft carrying a mandatory consecutive two-year sentence.

These cases are the result of an investigation by the United States Secret Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration. Substantial assistance was provided by the Glendora Police Department and the Culver City Police Department.

These case are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Scott M. Lara, William M. Rollins, Veronica M.A. Alegría, Julia S. Choe and Sara B. Milstein of the General Crimes Section.

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